

THE RIO KID NEVER MISSES—
DON'T MISS HIM — HE'S INSIDE!

The POPULAR

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EVERY
TUESDAY
Week Ending
March 31st,
1928.
New Series.
No. 479.



"HANDS UP!"

A BOY OUTLAW'S FORTUNE!

Three thousand dollars—all his own, to start life afresh in a new country. So thinks the RIO KID as he rides lightheartedly through the hills. But Fate steps in and ordains that those dollars should be put to quite another use!

The RIO KID!

by RALPH REDWAY



ANOTHER BREATHLESSLY THRILLING LONG COMPLETE WESTERN YARN, FEATURING THE RIO KID, BOY OUTLAW OF TEXAS!

THE FIRST CHAPTER.

Hold Up!

THE Rio Kid was rich. He smiled cheerily as he thought of it.

With the Kid, as is the way of the punchers, it was easy come and easy go, as far as money was concerned. It was unlikely that the Kid's roll would last him very long. But there it was, so long as it lasted—three thousand dollars in good notes packed away inside his belt. He smiled when he thought of that deal in cows at Blue Pine that had turned out such a bonanza for him. With three thousand dollars in his belt the Kid felt as rich as a Rockefeller.

Many half-formed plans were revolving in the Kid's mind as he rode at an easy trot by a trail that wound among wooded hills and islands of trees and scrubs. With so many dollars at his command he could abandon, if he liked, his roving life, and buy a share in a ranch on some region where the name and fame of the Rio Kid had not penetrated. That thought was a tempting one, though the Kid shook his head over it. He would have liked to ranch in the Frio country, and ride with the Double Bar bunch; but the Frio country was barred to the Kid, except for flying.

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This week: Saved by an Outlaw!

visits when the longing to see the old lay-out was too strong for him to resist.

Another stunt that came into the Kid's mind was to light right out of Texas and break new country on the western side of the long range of mountains. More than once he had dallied with the thought of the gold-mining country over in Arizona. And yet another idea was to cross the Rio Grande into Mexico, and set up in that country, where he would be secure from Texas sheriffs in a ranch of his own.

None of these stunts had come yet to a definite decision in his mind. The Kid was in no hurry. His roll was safe in his belt, and he rode the plains a free man, enjoying every minute of the day under the blazing sun, and sleeping at night by the side of his mustang as soundly as an infant. There was heap time for making up his mind, the Kid reckoned; and in the meantime he revolved all sorts of tempting schemes, all made possible by that roll of three thousand dollars that he had cinched in a deal in cows.

But among the many thoughts that were passing in the Rio Kid's cheery mind, as he rode along the trail among the cottonwood-trees, the thought of losing his roll was not one. The Kid packed two guns, and was remarkably useful in handling them, and he would not have turned an inch out of his way to avoid any gang of rustlers in Texas. And he was not in a rustler's country now; he was riding through a region where settlers had settled thick, and there was no lawless rider to be looked for, unless it was the Rio Kid himself. But, little as the Kid suspected it, the danger of losing his roll was very near and close.

He checked his horse at the sight of smoke rising from a distance across the cottonwoods. A cowman to his fingertips, the Kid hated the settlements that were driving the cows out of the country, and he would not pass near by one of the homesteads if he could help it. He had had enough of them and their wire fences up in the Alamo, and here, in the Buttes country, he did not want to see any more of them. And as the Kid pulled in the grey mustang a man stepped out of the trees with a rifle at his shoulder, and the muzzle bore fair and full upon the horseman.

"Put 'em up!"

The Kid laughed.

There was no man in Texas quicker

on the draw than the Rio Kid; but he knew when he had a chance and when he hadn't. With a rifle muzzle bearing directly upon him at a distance of three yards, the Kid did not think of touching a gun. He lifted his hands over his head, letting his reins drop on his mustang's neck, and laughed as he looked at the man with the rifle. It was no swaggering gunman or rough-riding rustler who had held up the Kid. The man, in his ragged store clothes and tattered Stetson, his hard, scrubby-lined face, was evidently a settler, and one who had struck hard luck. Grim trouble and hard poverty could be read in every line of his rugged face and a light of desperation in his eyes. The Kid laughed; he could not help it. He had carried his roll safe through some of the hardest sections of Texas, only to be held up at the finish by a farming jasper—a nesting Rube. But the man, farmer, or sheep-herder, or whatever he was, was obviously in grim and desperate earnest, and his eyes burned at the Kid over the levelled rifle.

"Say, feller, you've got me beat!" said the Kid good-humouredly. "Is there anything in that gun?"

"You'll sure find there is if you begin any fooling," grunted the settler. "Light down and pony up what you've got in your rags." He made a threatening motion with the rifle. "I guess you look a piece of a gunman. Well, you touch a gun, stranger, and it will be the last thing you do on this side Jordan."

The Kid dismounted without touching a gun.

"Keep 'em up!" grunted the man. "Anything to oblige, feller—so long as you're holding the gun," smiled the Kid. "I reckon you're not used to this game. You don't strike me as a rustler."

The settler smiled bitterly.

"No. I've got to raise a stake or go under—not only me, if you want to know. But I mean business."

"You look as if you do, hombre," smiled the Kid. "You look as if you've had bad luck; but you've struck it lucky this time. You're holding up a man that's got three thousand dollars to his name!"

The settler stared at him.

"Pony up!" he said briefly.

"How can a galoot pony up with his paws patting the top of his hat, feller?" remonstrated the Kid. "I guess if you want my roll you'll have to take it."

"Keep 'em up!"

"Sure!" assented the Kid.

The man advanced on him, holding the rifle in his right hand, the butt under his arm, his finger on the trigger. But the muzzle never wavered for a moment. With his left hand the man detached the Kid's two guns, one after the other, from their holsters, and dropped them in the grass. Then he stepped back a pace or two.

"You can put your paws down now and hand it over."

"Sure!"

The disarmed Kid dropped his hands. He slid his right hand into the pocket of his buckskin breeches, as if the roll was there. In that pocket, the Kid's tenacious fingers gripped the little derring-pistol that was concealed there. He smiled good-humouredly. Many a time, in a close corner, had the Kid fired from the pocket, without drawing the weapon, and never had he missed his aim. The rifle was still bearing upon him, but the life of the man who had held him up was the Kid's for the taking. An experienced trail-thief would never have allowed the Kid to get his hand into his pocket; but this

man was evidently new to the game, and did not savvy. The Kid's blue eyes gleamed with merriment. He knew that he could lay the unsuspecting jasper dead at his feet by a movement of his finger, the man was quite unconscious of it. The situation appealed to the Rio Kid as comic.

"Pronto!" rapped out the hold-up man.

"Pronto sure!" grinned the Kid.

Bang!

The rifle flew up and exploded harmlessly as a bullet ripped along the jasper's right arm, and he staggered back with a gasping yell. Loud rang the merry laugh of the Rio Kid. The rifle thudded down from a helpless arm, and at the same moment the Kid's guns were snatched up and bore full upon the hold-up man.

"Your turn," said the Kid pleasantly. "Put 'em up, Rube!"

THE SECOND CHAPTER.

The Settlers!

"FRANK!"

It was a woman's voice calling.

The Rio Kid started. He could not see who called; the thick cottonwood-trees hid her from sight. But the look of the hold-up man told that he was the "Frank" to whom the unseen woman was calling.

The man had not put up his hands at the Kid's order. He stood before the Kid like an image of dull despair, his hands at his sides, the right drenched with the blood that ran down his arm. Almost the length of his arm the Kid's derring bullet had ripped, and the blood flowed freely. The man stood in his tracks, staring almost stupidly at the Rio Kid.

"Frank!"

The voice came again—from the direction of the curling smoke that the Kid had discerned over the thickets.

The Kid's expression changed.

"Say, Rube, who's calling?" he asked quickly.

The man stared at him dully without answering.

"Spill it!" snapped the Kid.

"My wife!"

"You've got a wife, and you're such a durned gink as to play this game!" snapped the Kid contemptuously.

"Shoot, and be hanged to you!" muttered the settler.

The Kid's guns dropped back into his holsters.

"I'm sure not wasting powder and lead on a dog-goned rube!" he grinned. "Why, you gink, as soon as I had my hand in my pocket, you was a dead geek if I'd wanted! I've let you off with a scratch on your arm, and you've got off cheap! Sabe?"

The man nodded, without speaking.

There was a sound in the thickets of someone approaching, and the woman's voice called again. The man shivered.

"She'll be here in a minute or less," said the Kid. "You don't want to put her wise to this. I guess she doesn't know?"

The man shook his head.

"I reckoned not," assented the Kid. "You're hard hit, and you wanted to make a raid, and this stunt came into your cabeza. I guess you spotted me far off and laid for me here?"

The man nodded again.

"Keep to your sheep, hombre!" said the Kid banteringly. "You're sure not cut out for a road-agent or a rustler! Look here, she'll be here in a shake of a possum's tail! You've had an accident with your gun, and hurt your arm. Sabe?"

"You won't tell her?"

"Ain't I shouting to you that I

won't?" growled the Kid impatiently. "You've sure had a gun accident, and I'm binding it up for you! Give me your fin, feller! Pronto!"

He ripped off the man's rough coat and rolled back the shirt-sleeve. There was an ugly gash along the brawny arm. The man was staring dully and wonderingly at the Kid. Only a few minutes before his rifle had been threatening the Kid's life, but the Kid seemed to have forgotten that. He was only thinking of the woman who was coming through the trees—who was not to know that "Frank" had attempted a robbery on the trail.

A few seconds more, and she came out of a hidden path in the mesquite and saw them.

She ran forward, with a cry.

"Frank, didn't you hear me call? I heard a shot! What has happened?"

The Kid lifted his Stetson hat.

"Your husband has sure had a little accident, ma'am," he said. "Only a scratch. I was going to bind it up for him. I guess you'd better tell him to be more careful in handling a gun! I reckon he's more used to the plough!" The Kid stopped back. "You'll sure handle that scratch better than I could, ma'am."

The woman gave him a quick look. She was young, and had been good-looking, but the hard life of the frontier had lined her face. In her careworn face, indeed, the Kid could read the reasons that had driven the settler to his desperate act. Possibly she surmised that there had been something more than an accident; but, if so, she made no remark. She turned to her husband at once. His eyes dropped before hers, and his face was burning.

"I guess this will be useful, ma'am," said the Kid.

He handed her a silken neck-scarf.

She thanked him with a nod, and bound up the gash on the wounded arm. Her fingers were trembling.

"It's only a scratch, Netta!" muttered the wounded man huskily, finding his voice at last. "Only a scratch, my dear! Nothing!"

The Kid turned to his waiting mustang, but he did not mount.

The settler's haggard eyes were watching him over the woman's shoulder in mute appeal.

The hapless man, driven to a desperate deed by some pressing, bitter necessity which the Kid could only surmise, was obviously at heart no robber or hold-up man. Why the Kid was hiding his guilt he did not know, but he was intensely glad and relieved. His stare told of gratitude and dumb appeal. He was grateful for the Kid's generosity, but he wanted to see the stranger ride on—ride on and disappear, taking away with him the possibility of the woman learning what her husband had done or attempted to do.

The Rio Kid understood perfectly, yet he hesitated.

There was something in this couple that appealed to the Kid. The man, worn and weary as he was, was not over twenty-five, the woman years younger. They had hit a bad streak in the nesting country, and worn themselves down in a struggle with grudging Nature. The Kid had seen their kind before; he could divine their history easily enough. He could guess that they had come out to settle in a new country, deluded by the glowing tale of some Western land-agent, and sunk their little capital in the purchase of a holding that required further capital to make it pay—and the further capital was wanting. The next step would be a mortgage, and then

there would be the interest on the mortgage to meet, and after that a weary losing fight till the inevitable end came. And the Kid calculated that that end was very near—that attempt to hold up a passing traveller was an indication of it. The mute appeal of the man's anxious eyes urged the Kid to ride on and mind his own business. But he did not ride on.

"Say, Rube," he drawled, "I guess you've got a barn or something near by your shebang where a pilgrim can bed down for the night?"

The settler set his lips.

"Yes," he said in a low, husky voice.

"No objection, madam?" asked the Kid politely.

The woman shook her head.

"Ride on, and you'll see it!" muttered the settler.

And the Kid thanked him smilingly, and rode on to the homestead.

THE THIRD CHAPTER. The Kid Does Not Ride!

THE Rio Kid camped in the barn. His first care was for his horse—that was always the Kid's first care. Then, in the glowing sunset, the Kid took a walk abroad.

Of the settler and his wife he saw nothing.

They had gone into the homestead—a frame-house, neatly built, standing in a garden that was carefully tended. It was a large holding, watered by a stream that came down from the hills, and on all sides the Kid saw the evidences of long and patient labour. Miles

of mesquite and pecan had been cleared and planted; wire fences—hateful to the cowpuncher's eyes—ran for great distances. A man was at work in the fields, cutting the alfalfa for the cattle, but of other hired labour the Kid saw no sign. There was little stock, but much more than one man could well tend.

The Kid's handsome face was thoughtful as he strolled about the homestead, and a little clouded when he returned to the barn at last as night deepened over the hills.

A single light burned from a window of the frame-house. The Kid looked at it for some minutes before he went into the barn.

The night deepened.

The moon rose over the hills—the glowing moon of the south. There was a step in the wide open doorway of the barn.

It was the settler.

His arm was bandaged; in the glimmering moonlight the Kid could see that his face was pale. For a moment the Kid's hand hovered over a holster, but he saw that the homesteader carried no weapon.

"You're here?" muttered the man, peering into the shadows of the barn.

"Here!" drawled the Kid.

The man came towards him. His eyes gleamed through the shadows at the Kid.

"I guess you weren't looking for a show to bed down when I met you in the mesquite?" he said in a low voice.

"Nope!" agreed the Kid.

"Why didn't you ride on, then?"

"Ask me another, feller," said

THE KID CAMPS DOWN! There was a step in the doorway of the barn, and the settler appeared, his arm in a bandage. The Kid's hand hovered above his gun-holster. "You camping here?" muttered the settler. (See Chapter 3.)



the Kid, good-humouredly. "I just reckoned I'd bed down right here."

"You can do as you like, I guess," muttered the homesteader, "so long as you don't tell her."

"I reckon not," said the Kid. "Say, feller, I guess you was plumb loco to try on that game of holding up a pilgrim on the trail. It sure ain't in your line at all."

"No; I was mad, I guess. And I'm glad I slipped up on it, though you mayn't believe me," said the young man. "It was for her sake. But when I thought that she'd know what I'd done I——" He choked. "Keep that to yourself, stranger. You've come to no harm, anyhow, and your roll is safe so long as you hang on here—I swear that!"

The Kid smiled.

"I guess I know how to keep my roll safe," he said. "Safe from any galoot except my little self, anyway."

"I'm sorry for what I did. I'm glad I failed. I guess I was a little out of my senses," said the nester.

"I guess so," assented the Kid.

"I'm at the end of my tether here," said the man. "That's my excuse—if it's any excuse."

"I guess I know how you're fixed," said the Kid. "You sank all you had in the homestead, and you sure couldn't carry on."

"That's it." The man leaned on the wall of the barn and gazed moodily at the Kid in the dusk. "I struck a bad season the second year, and then——"

"Then the pesky mortgage followed," said the Kid. He knew the story by heart.

"Yes; I raised three thousand dollars, and it saw me through. But the interest on the mortgage, and the want of capital—I guess you know how it works."

"I know."

"The mortgage expires to-day, and Judge Shandy, of Butte—that's the man who holds my paper—won't renew it. I guess he wants the holding. Five years of labour are in it. It's worth three times as much. Shandy's the richest man in the Buttes country, and I guess he's made it all the same way," said the settler bitterly. "He won't give an inch. He will be here to-morrow for his money—or the land."

"Three thousand?" said the Kid thoughtfully.

"Just that."

"And you've got——"

"Ten cents," said the settler.

The Kid laughed.

"I guess I've heard of Judge Shandy, of Butte," he said. "It won't be any use offering him ten cents."

"The game's up for me—and for her," said the Settler wearily. "Five years, and all we had, gone—to make Judge Shandy a little richer. Things are looking up now; we've turned the corner here, but for that. That's why it came into my head this afternoon, when I saw you riding up in the mesquite——"

He broke off, his face crimson.

"I guess I was out of my senses. I'm glad I failed. So long as she never knows——"

"She won't know," said the Kid.

"I guess I've no right to ask it of you. If you hadn't been so handy with your shooter I—I might have——"

"Heap things would have happened, one time or another, if I hadn't been handy with my shooter," smiled the Kid. "I don't owe you any grudge for what you tried on, Rube. You don't want to let that worry you. How's the fin?"

The man glanced down carelessly at his bandaged arm.



SOME SHOOTING! The judge came thundering on. As he sighted the Kid he dragged at his horse, and a gun leaped into his hand. Bang! But that gun flew from Judge Shandy's hand the moment it left his belt. "Forget it, feller," grinned the Kid. "You sure ain't handy enough with a gun to pull on me!" (See Chapter 1.)

"That's nothing—only a scratch."
"I should sure be sorry if I'd spoiled you for the plough," grinned the Kid. "But I reckon I only aimed to make you drop that gun. Next time you hold up a pilgrim on the trail don't let him get his hand into his pocket. He might have a derringer there, and he might know how to shoot through the lining. Sabe?"

The settler smiled faintly.
"There won't be any next time," he said. "I tell you I was loco just then, and I'm plumb glad I failed. Money got that way will never do any good. I guess you're a gunman, from the way you handled me. But you're a white man, whoever you are!"

"Sure thing!" smiled the Kid.
"You're welcome to bed down as long as you like. Only, after to-morrow this shebang will belong to Judge Shandy, of Butte, and you will want to hit the trail," said the settler. "I guess the judge ain't hospitable to strangers. He will be here to take possession at ten in the morning."

"If you don't square?"
"He sure knows I can't square. He will bring his agent with him to take over. Good-night, stranger!"

"Good-night, feller!"
The settler was gone.
The Rio Kid unrolled his blanket on a stack of straw. He lay down to sleep. But sleep did not come quickly.

For a long time he watched the stars, through the open doorway of the barn, gleaming like points of fire in the dark, velvety sky.

Through his mind were running the various plans he had been revolving that afternoon as he rode along the trail. His roll was still safe in his belt, and all those plans were still practicable. The Rio Kid shook his head at last, and closed his eyes in slumber.

He turned out early in the fresh, sunny morning, and joined the settler and his wife at breakfast in the frame-house.

After that he went for his horse. He

saddled the grey mustang, but still did not mount and ride.

The Rio Kid seemed to be in a state of doubt.

He left his mustang hitched by the barn and strolled moodily on the trail that led towards the distant town of Butte. By that trail Judge Shandy was to arrive. Judge Shandy was nothing to the Kid. The whole affair was no business of his. Yet, somehow, he seemed unable to make up his mind to ride. The Rio Kid was still loafing about the trail when two horsemen came in sight from the direction of Butte.

The Kid looked at them. He had seen Judge Shandy before; he knew the grim, hard-faced man. The other man was apparently the agent of whom the settler had spoken.

The judge drew rein at the sight of the handsome young puncher in the trail. He stared at the Kid.

"Do you belong here?" he asked.
"Sort of, just at present, feller," drawled the Kid.

He knew the judge, but the judge did not know him. The Kid smiled inwardly at the thought of what Judge Shandy's thoughts might be had he guessed that he was addressing the Rio Kid, wanted by half the sheriffs in Texas.

The judge frowned. He was a great and important man in the Butte country, and he did not "stand" for being addressed so carelessly by a cow-puncher. "I guess I never knew that Frank Hedworth had hired men about his shebang," he snapped.

The Kid laughed outright, rather tickled at the idea of being taken for a hired man.

"You want to keep civil, young man," said the judge grimly. "If you're Frank Hedworth's man now you'll be my man within the next half-hour. And I guess you'll be fired."

"I guess I shouldn't wait to be fired if I was your man, judge," grinned the Kid. "You ain't the kind of boss I'm

looking for, nohow. And the shebang isn't yours yet, judge."

"What do you mean, you fool?" snapped the judge harshly. "I guess that fellow hasn't found three thousand dollars all of a sudden. Why—what—what—"

The judge broke off with a yell as a six-gun looked into his hard face, with the Kid's smiling face behind it.

"You're sure no end of a big man in this country, judge," said the Kid, "but you can't call a galoot fancy names."

"Put down that gun!" roared the judge.

His hand went to the revolver in his belt.

"Don't touch it," advised the Kid. His face was still smiling, but the glint in his eyes was a warning. Judge Shandy withdrew his hand very hastily from his belt.

"I guess a lot of galoots in the Butte country would jump for joy, judge, if I dropped you off that hoss," said the Kid musingly.

Then, as he caught sight of Netta Hedworth's startled face looking from the doorway of the frame-house, the Kid's Colt disappeared into its holster again. He laughed.

"You can ride on, judge, and be durned to you!"

He stepped aside from the trail, and the judge, scowling blackly, rode on with his man.

The Kid stood where he was. He saw the judge hitch his horse outside the frame-house and enter. And he strode into the framehouse with the air of a master.

"That gink sure gets my goat!" the Kid muttered, biting his lip.

The Kid moved slowly back along the trail to where he had left the mustang hitched by the barn door.

He rubbed the mustang's neck, and the grey muzzle nuzzled under his arm. The Kid regarded his steed thoughtfully.

"I guess it's time we hit the trail, old hoss," he said slowly. "I guess we've got no business hyer. I guess we're lighting out for a cow country where the folk ain't heard of the Rio Kid, and we're going ranching, old hoss. I guess we're done with riding the trails and camping in the chapparal, and shooting up the camps, and keeping out of the

way of the sheriffs. I reckon we're going ranching, and that roll in my belt will see us through, old boss."

The Kid placed his hand on his saddle. But he did not mount.

His eyes were on the frame-house, where the judge had entered, his man remaining outside with the horses.

The Kid sighed.

Leaving his mustang, he walked across to the house. The judge's man eyed him curiously and suspiciously as he came up. But he made no hostile movement; he had not forgotten the extremely slick way in which the Kid had drawn a six-gun on the judge.

The Kid gave him a cheery nod.

"I guess your boss is here to take over this gol-darned shebang," he remarked.

"You can put your boots on that," was the reply.

"Your boss is a durned skinfint, hombre."

The man grinned.

"He sure knows his way about," he asserted.

"But he might slip up on this raffle at the very last minute," the Kid suggested.

"I guess not."

"S'pose there was a fool galoot loping about this section with a roll in his belt and without hoss-sense enough to look after it?" argued the Kid. "S'pose a feller had made a heap dollars by a deal in cows, and the dollars was burning a hole in his belt? S'posing all that, your boss might slip up on this deal and ride back to Butte with three thousand dollars in his pocket, instead of roping in a homestead worth three times as much."

The man stared at him, evidently not understanding in the least.

The Kid passed him, and went into the frame-house.

THE FOURTH CHAPTER. Money Talks!

JUDGE SHANDY was sitting at the bare table in the clean, neat room. His face was, in expression, like unto that of a graven image. Not a trace of human feeling was to be seen in it.

The judge was known in the Butte country as a hard man, hard in his looks, in his ways, in his dealings—hard as iron. He had never held the bad end of a bargain, and he had never let off the other man without extracting every ounce of his pound of flesh—and a few ounces over if he could. Frank Hedworth knew it, and he had no hope. Yet, because so much depended on it, he was pleading with his creditor, pleading for a little time and a little chance. The judge let him run on without interruption, because it was not yet ten o'clock. At ten precisely the money was due, according to the letter of the bond, and the judge knew well that his debtor had not the money. When the clock struck ten it would be time for the judge to speak; until then the ruined homesteader was welcome to chew the rag as much as he liked.

The Kid, looking in, observed the scene. The judge, sitting like a graven image, said nothing—Frank Hedworth, leaning passionately over the table, talked and explained and put his case. Netta sat at a little distance, her face white and set. She knew that there was no hope.

"Your interest's safe, judge," said the settler. "I keep on telling you I've turned the corner. The stock's turning out well; I've got the fields planted up. One more season will set me right. I tell you, I've got here some of the best land in the Butte country."

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Then the judge spoke.

"I guess I'm wise to that!" he remarked. "That's sure why I lent you money on it."

The settler stared at him.

"You mean you aimed to get it away from me?"

The judge replied only with a slight laugh, but not in words. He took out his watch and glanced at it.

"Ten!" he said.

"Judge!" muttered the settler.

"I guess you've been chewing the rag some, Frank Hedworth," said the judge, with a yawn. "I guess I've heard enough, and a little over. I've called for three thousand dollars that was due at ten o'clock this morning."

Hedworth made a gesture of despair.

"Money talks!" said the judge. "All other talk is just chewing the rag, I guess. Pony up."

The settler dropped his head upon his hands.

The Rio Kid loafed into the room, a smile on his face, and his mind made up, if it had not been made up before. All the plans that had been in his thoughts, founded on the roll in his belt, had been dismissed now. The Kid was not to go ranching; it was still riding the trails and camping in the hills for the Rio Kid.

The judge glared at him under his bent brows.

"You're not wanted here, puncher," he snarled. "You hoof it out of this, pronto."

The Kid only smiled.

Hedworth raised his head.

"Stay where you are, if you choose, lad," he said. "This is still my house, till the law gives that skinfint possession of it. Stay."

"It's your say-so, feller," agreed the Kid.

The judge gritted his teeth.

"I guess it won't be for long," he snarled, and he rose from his seat. "I guess—"

"Guess again!" grinned the Rio Kid. "Money talks, as you said yourself, judge. You ain't foreclosing this mortgage, feller—not by long chalks, when my pardner here is ready to pay on the nail."

Hedworth stared at him.

"Where's the money?" sneered Shandy.

"Right here."

The Kid unpacked his roll.

The settler stared in blank amazement as bills to the value of three thousand dollars were flung on the table. The judge's face became as black as midnight. It was not his money he wanted; it was the homestead and the land enriched by years of patient cultivation, worth three or four times the sum. That was what the judge wanted; but the money was there for him to take.

"What does this mean?" exclaimed Hedworth hoarsely, staring at the bills, and then at the Rio Kid. Netta Hedworth started to her feet with a cry.

The Rio Kid laughed lightly.

"What does it mean?" he repeated. "Money talks, I reckon. I'm lending you three thousand dollars to square this bloodsucker. There's the greenbacks, feller—pay the vampire, and kick him out of your shack."

"I can't take it from you, a stranger," muttered the settler hoarsely.

The Kid chuckled.

"You was sure thinking different yesterday, feller," he said. "Forget it, pard. Pick up the greenbacks and don't chew the rag. You've got to do it—for her sake," he added, in a low voice, with a nod towards Netta.

Hedworth glanced at his wife.

"I'll pay—some day—every cent," he breathed.

"Some day," smiled the Kid. "Some day I'll call around—not for a while, I reckon; I'm hitting a long trail to-day. Some day, when I'm back from Arizona. So long, settler: good-bye, ma'am."

The Rio Kid strolled out, smiling.

He stopped to give the judge's man a word as he passed him.

"You'll sure be riding back to Butte," he said. "Your boss won't be roping in this shebang, not this journey. I'll tell the world. Your boss sure looked as mad as a hornet, feller. You tell him that if he's hunting trouble with a little man about my size, I'm riding up the trail, and I'll give him time to come up if he's bright and spry."

"I'll sure tell him."

The Kid walked across to his mustang and mounted. He rode away down the trail at a gentle trot. His handsome face still thoughtful, but cheery and light-hearted. The Kid's roll was gone, and with it had gone his dreams of ranching in a cow country. But the Kid did not care. He had his guns and his horse, and perhaps, at the bottom of his heart, he was glad to think no longer of giving up the wild, free life of the prairie and the trails.

A smile broke over his face as he heard the hurried clatter of hoofbeats behind him, a few miles from the homestead he had saved from the clutch of the usurer. He halted his mustang beside the trail, and sat in the saddle, looking back, his hand resting on a six-gun. A horseman was galloping up the trail in a cloud of dust.

"That galoot is sure in a hurry," the Kid grinned.

The judge came thundering on. As he sighted the Kid by the trail, he dragged at his horse, and a gun leaped into his hand.

Bang!

The gun flew from Judge Shandy's hand the moment it left his belt. He gave a yell.

"Forget it, feller," grinned the Kid. "You sure ain't handy enough with a gun to pull on me, judge."

The judge sat his horse panting. His gun lay in the trail: his hand was numbed by the shock. His eyes blazed at the Rio Kid.

"I don't know who you are," he said at last, between his teeth. "A gunman from the cow country, I reckon. You've got me beat."

"Sure!" smiled the Kid.

"I sure reckoned on cleaning up that settler, and you beat me," said the judge. "But any man in the Butte country will tell you that Judge Shandy is a bad man to meddle with. Ride as hard as you like, puncher; you won't get out of the Butte country to brag of it."

"Do I look like riding hard?" said the Kid banteringly. "You're such a big man at blowing off your mouth, judge. I reckon you don't scare me worth a Continental red cent." He waved his hand towards the green hills that shut in the horizon to the westward. "If you figure on gunning after me, judge, I'll tell you where to find me. I'm camping three days in the Buttes, and I'll look for you and any gang of bulldozers that you can bring along."

And with a scornful snap of the fingers, the Rio Kid wheeled his horse and rode away to the west.

THE END.

(You'll find the Rio Kid in another sparkling tale of the West, entitled: "HELD TO RANSOM!" Be sure you do not miss it!)